

Duxbury Rural and Historical Society

Duxbury Clipper

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Picture This History

First Known Photograph of 'King Caesar' Found

By KEITH L. MARTIN

"King Caesar" Ezra Weston, Jr., is making his first appearance in town since his death over 150 years ago,



**DRHS Executive Director
Patrick Browne holds the
original photo and frame.**

thanks to a new and rare finding by the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society.

The Society recently confirmed that a photograph that had been in its collection since 1968 is that of the legendary Duxbury shipbuilder and that the image has both local and national significance.

"This is not just an important Duxbury item, but an important photograph in general in terms of the history of photography," said DRHS

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taken outside, giving a glimpse of Duxbury in the 1840s. While it is not much of a view, Browne believes it is probably taken by the Blue Fish River at the shipyard owned by Weston, Jr.

In addition, if you look at the photograph, you can see two "H"-style brackets, the staging for building a ship. From consulting notes, Browne said the only ship built in Duxbury around that time was the *Hope*, one of the largest ships built in New England at that time.

"This is not only a photograph of King Caesar, but of Duxbury, the start of the ship *Hope* and Duxbury's oldest photograph," he said. "This has been a great year of finds for the Society, but this is the best."

Browne added that the historical artifact also sheds lights on one of Duxbury's most prominent figures, where only a little is known about his personal demeanor, yet alone what he looked like. Now, Duxburyites and others have their first glimpse of Weston, Jr., hunched over with a cane, posing with Bosun.

"A lot of people have commented that he doesn't look like what they expected him to," he said. "They imagined a more portly, larger than life figure, but he is pretty tall and thin. It also says something of his personality. We have little to go on, but what we have says he was extremely business-like and a somewhat impatient man, so maybe he had a sense of humor after all [in posing for the picture]."

Browne said that a copy of the photo will soon be on display at the King Caesar House as he is speaking to many other organizations about the Society's find,

including the Society for Preservation of New England Artifacts, the American Museum of Photography and the Deguerrian Society in Pennsylvania.

While those outside Duxbury may see the historic nature of photography, Browne also sees the find of a lifetime, giving local citizens their first glimpse of a town legend and a look at life in the 1840s.

"I never thought we would get a photo of King Caesar," he said. "This is the greatest thing we could possibly find in terms of shedding light on him."

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Rare Find is First Known Photo of King Caesar

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Executive Director Patrick Browne. "If our theory is right, this was taken within the first years of photography in Boston around 1840."

Browne said that while J.M. Daguerre made his "daguerreotype" public in 1839 in Paris, it took another year or two before it came to Boston. When that occurred, Josiah Hawes was one of the first in the Boston area to learn the art, meaning that Hawes was most likely the artist behind the daguerreotype capturing one of Duxbury's most prominent figures.

But how did the Society know that this hazy, ghostly image from the past was that of King Caesar?

That discovery, said Browne, came from the notes of Gershom Bradford, who along with his brother Edward donated the Bradford house to the Society in 1968, complete with its contents.

Browne discovered the photo some time ago when looking for images of the Bradford family. "I could tell by looking at it that it was an early photograph, but the person in it was

not identified," he said. "But I knew it had to be someone important so I brought it back to the office and tried to figure out who it was."

Browne consulted with others on the origin, beginning with John Daly at Snug Harbor Boatworks. Because the photo contains timbers and appears to be taken by the water, Browne assumed it was taken at a boatyard, which Daley confirmed, identifying what looked like staging for ship building in the photo and that Duxbury's shipyards were 's.

With that information and looking at the costumes in the photo as well as the style of photography and the frame, Browne figured the picture dated back to around the 1840s. The next discovery about the photograph would confirm his beliefs.

While combing the notes of Gershom Bradford, curatorial volunteer Polly Nash came across one that indicated that the picture was indeed that of Weston, Jr. and "Bosun" the dog, belonging to his great-grandfather, Captain Gershom Bradford, who was also Weston, Jr.'s brother-in-law.



Ezra Weston, Jr., or "King Caesar," appears for the first time in this photo believed to be taken between 1840-1842, making it the oldest photograph of Duxbury and the only photo of Weston, Jr. to date.

Bradford did, however, have some incorrect dates regarding the photo that may explain why it wasn't found until now, said Browne.

"He wrote that the first photograph was taken in 1845, but King Caesar died in 1842,

so he must have seen a problem and tucked the photograph away and never publicized it," he said. "Photography came to Boston in 1840, so there is a two-year span this photograph could've been taken, during the last two

years of Weston, Jr.'s life."

Browne said further investigation of the details of the photograph have turned up more significant history relevant to Duxbury.

First, the photograph is see next page